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ABSTRACT

American education is not as inadequate as public opinion indicates. The literacy and skill of American youth are higher today than forty years ago because of our high achievement standards and commitment to equal educational opportunity. These opposing principles have been reconciled by the diversity encouraged in institutions, teachers, and instructional materials. Nationally sponsored achievement testing contradicts these principles; furthermore, many minimal competency programs already established at the state and local level exhibit the desired diversity. Norm-referenced tests provide most of the achievement data, but are open to misuse and misinterpretation by persons who know little about mental measurement. To encourage the development of criterion-referenced tests, the National Institute of Education should promote testing that helps teachers in the diagnosis of learning problems; and should re-enact the Education Professions Development Act which encouraged in-service teacher training in measurement. Minimal competency testing will have one of three effects: (1) students will be allowed to progress through school at different rates, increasing the cost of school completion for many students: (2) alternative institutions resembling the Job Corps must be developed for students who fail; (3) or we must live with the consequences of youth rejected by our educational and economic system, in the name of improving educational standards. Cultural bias and the principles of cognitive measurement should be considered before enacting legislation on achievement testing. (CP)

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TESTS AND SCHOOLING

Address by Harold Howe II
Vice President for Education and Research, The Ford Foundation
at the National Conference on Achievement Testing
Washington, D.C.
March 1 - 3, 1978

We are gathered here at the invitation of Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare Joseph A. Califano, Jr. and in sight of the Congress of the United States and other agencies of the Federal Government to consider achievement testing in the schools. If anyone had told me ten years ago that such a meeting would come about, I would have bet ten to one against it because of the belief that testing in the schools was not the business of the Federal Government. But here we all are--educators, parents, testing experts, civil rights advocates, local, state, and Federal officials, and others.

The reason most of us are here is not really our abiding interest in the theory and practice of achievement testing. We are here because many Americans are deeply concerned about their schools. They think that the schools are doing an inadequate job of helping children to learn, especially in fundamental skills that are the tools of more advanced learning. Whether they are justified in thinking that, no one can say with certainty. But there can be no question about the pervasiveness and strength of the feeling that American schools suffer shortcomings.

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The origins of these feelings are complex, and people who agree that schooling needs improvement don't agree at all on the roots of the problems, on what needs to be done about them, or about how serious they are. Using a medical analogy, some think that the condition is like a cold, which will go away if simple remedies are taken; others would call if flu, requiring more serious treatment; and some would put the patient in the hospital for oxygen and strong drugs because they think he has double pneumonia. Because no one really knows what the condition is and because our capacity to measure it is limited, there is some tendency for all of us to behave as if it might be pneumonia. Only then, it is argued, can we be sure that we have done everything possible for a patient that means a great deal to us--our children and our schools.

This conference was called to talk about how the Federal Government's concern for schooling, centered in both the Congress and HEW, can be joined to all the other interests represented here to devise more useful ways of determining what is being achieved in schools. Because Americans are worried about their schools, I want to begin with three broad statements about schools in general before turning to the uses and misuses of tests. Let me warn you that I am more positive about American schools than the general public is. Anyone poised to hear another educational comment flavored with gloom and doom had better leave for a smoke--or a coke in deference to Secretary Califano.

First of all, I think that compared with the rest of the world, schools in the United States are doing a good job. Since late 1968, when

President-elect Nixon suggested I vacate the United States Commissionership of Education, I have had considerable opportunity to observe education outside the United States, as well as at home. While I am aware of special corners of excellence in the schools of Western Europe, the Soviet Union, and other places, I do not know a country with a population as diverse as ours and so tumultuous an educational history that is doing as well as we are. American schools also have many corners of excellence and are delivering a solid job with vast numbers of children. There is much we can learn from schools elsewhere and much they can learn from us; there is plenty of room for improved practice in American schools, and some current evidence that particular aspects of schooling require special attention; but there is no reason to think that American education is in such a perilous state as some would have us believe. In other words, I don't think we have pneumonia, and I believe that treating the patient as if he did could do him unforeseen damage. While test scores have declined on many tests since 1960, some tests report unchanged scores, and others show gains.

Secondly, I call attention to the very great achievement of American schools in bringing into their classrooms almost all the children of almost all the people. We still have a job to do with the handicapped; migrant children are still ill-served; Spanish speaking, black and other minorities still constitute underachieving groups whose needs the schools have yet to meet adequately, particularly in central city ghettos; and the saga of Native Americans in education is long, sad, and unfinished. Recognizing all these remaining tasks, I still say

that the story of American education in the Twentieth Century is one of great achievement. We have built a diverse galaxy of public and private schools; and we have rid ourselves of a legally supported and racially defind dual system of schools. In 1900 about 6 percent of youth finished high school; today the comparable figure is 80 percent and about half of them to on to further education.

Now I am quite aware that finishing high school is not enough. One must also ask, what was learned in the process? That is the question we are raising at this meeting. But as we do so let us not forget that we have forged a broad public commitment to the importance of education in the life of our republic.

Despite some fraying at the edges, that commitment has not really wavered. For evidence look to the current public concern about levels of achievement among students. Americans want their schools to do more than just enroll large numbers of students. They want the students to learn something of value to them and to society. There always will be argument about exactly what should be learned. But there is a powerful concensus that it should include improved capacity to know and use both our common language, English, and the universal language, mathematics. Modern achievement testing is sending out signals that the schools are falling short of these goals.

To keep things in balance, these signals should not be allowed to dim the achievements of the schools in these important skill subjects. If one were able to select at random half a million 18-year olds from 1938 and another half a

million in 1978--high school graduates and non graduates--and give them almost any achievement test, the 1978 group would perform significantly better. The general levels of knowledge, literacy, and skill of today's youth are higher than they were forty years ago, and this is almost certainly the direct result of more schooling and of some degree of success in the schools today with students who were given no opportunity in earlier years.*

On the other side of the coin, if those selected at random in 1938 and 1978 were all high school graduates, the comparison would be reversed, and the students of 1938 would score higher. The high school graduates of 1938 were a select group compared to those of forty years later--about 40 percent of their age group as contrasted with 80 percent now. In the process of adapting our schools to the service of a much broader constituency, with many members who bring to school with them the handicaps of poverty and discrimination, we have taken on educational tasks that the schools are only beginning to learn how to perform.

In attempting those tasks, the schools may well have eroded some of the services they once provided to a more select group, although the record on that matter is confused. For example, the period of greatest change in student graduation rates, the 1960s, was also the period of the expansion of advanced

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* While there is no logitudinal achievement testing record that fully documents the generalizations in this paragraph and that below it, evidence from Army tests, from the Iowa tests, and from other sources suggests that these points are correct.

placement programs and the upgrading of curriculum, particularly in the sciences. These developments notwithstanding, it seems probable that some erosion in school services to the general population may have been the price of moving toward equality of educational opportunity for those who have so long been denied it. I am glad that we have paid this price, although I wish that we had been skillful enough to avoid it.

The task now before us for the remainder of this century is to keep the door of opportunity open for those the schools don't serve well without shortchanging either the new aspirants to opportunity or those who have customarily had it. This is not an easy task, and it will be made more difficult by demographic changes that will bring higher proportions of typically low scoring students to the schools in the years ahead. It is possible that achievement scores will not turn upward and may even decline more, trying our resolution and patience.

My third general point concerns our capacity to move on the two fronts of educational equity and excellence at the same time. Some people call these contradictory goals. They pose the issue as egalitarianism versus elitism, arguing that we cannot have both or that one will always suffer through emphasis on the other. It takes determination and hard work to keep these concerns in balance, but I would hate to see either an elitist or an egalitarian ethic dominate American educational thinking. At worst we should allow the two themes to compete equally; at best we should seek out the ways for them to come together.

One means by which these two principles in American education have been reconciled is the great diversity of institutions we have encouraged, partly by

happenstance and partly by plan. This diversity is especially clear in higher education with its great variety of public and private institutions. In schools the scene is more dominated by the public sector, and the parochial and independent schools are numerically less significant. But they are important just the same. Within the public schools there is diversity in respect to the nature of schools and probably more variety than there ought to be in quality among those with similar missions. This diversity starts with the prerogatives of local school boards and is augmented by the existence of fifty separate state systems. It is powerfully reinforced by the nature of Federalism in the United States and by historical traditions.

Even within the same school system and under one board of education, individual schools and teachers within those schools have important freedom in varying instruction and materials to fit their pupils. Our basic resource for improving quality in the public schools lies in helping teachers and principals to do a better job, and most of them would welcome such assistance. Changes in tests, textbooks, or promotion requirements are secondary lines of action that will not make much difference without the interest and support of teachers.

The presence of the Federal Government in any conspicuous role in the diversity of American schooling is a very recent phenomenon, particularly as a change agent in the schools. National education legislation was powerfully resisted in the 1950s and was accepted in the National Defense Education Act in 1958 under the umbrella of national security. The passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965 was possible because the Act embraced

the diversity of public and private schools and because a formula was found that allowed schools to receive support from Washington in furtherance of important national purposes without imposing uniformity and with great freedom for the schools in how they would meet those purposes.

I review this history because I find in present legislative proposals before Congress for national achievement testing an intent that opens the door to a nationalized school system. Not only is this concept anathema to the traditions of American education; it also holds the clear possibility of reducing the diversity on which depends our important balance between equity and excellence. Federal initiatives can make some contributions to improving learning of fundamental skills, and I will discuss some of these shortly. But it does not make sense to take precipitious action on nationally sponsored achievement testing. Not only would such action alter the nature of our country's diverse education arrangements, it would also be of doubtful use in improving what schools do to build basic skills in children.

The reason that the National Assessment of Education has been acceptable to both states and local school boards is that its policies and activities have been clearly in control of the Education Commission of the States, a creature of the states and not of Washington. Present efforts of HEW to bring more Federal control of the National Assessment through contracting procedures raise exactly the same dangers as the proposals for national achievement testing in the Congress.

I turn now to the challenge of what the several levels of government concerned with education might do about achievement testing. The first fact

to recognize is that much has already been done at state and local levels--some of it perhaps useful and some of it less so. By last September, nineteen states had adopted programs of basic competency testing, sixteen had such programs in a planning stage, and eleven were studying the matter. That leaves out only four states, and for all I know they may have joined the basic competency testing bandwagon in the meantime. Some states, of course, have long maintained a variety of skills tests and examinations in particular subjects. Local school boards have taken initiatives similar to those of states, but I have seen no accurate census of these. For many years, local school boards have sponsored standardized achievement tests. Indeed, it is the record of lower scores on many of these in recent years that brings us together here.

Most of this expanded activity falls under two broad headings: 1) Testing that will give a composite picture at the state and local levels of the language and mathematics skills of students at varying ages in order to evaluate programs or to identify the need for remediation; 2) Testing designed to apply to a particular point of passage in the educational progress of young people, either to qualify them for award of a diploma or promotion to the next grade or to keep them where they are until they demonstrate more advanced skills. There is considerable variation from state to state in what tests are to be used, the ages tested, and other details, a characteristic of the present wave of activity on the achievement test front that I heartily endorse because it continues the diversity from which we have gained so much.

The achievement tests used in the schools fall into two broad categories that testers call "norm-referenced" tests and "criterion referenced" tests respectively. Norm-referenced tests allow you to compare individual children and groups of children with each other on a common yardstick of achievement; criterion-referenced tests allow you to determine whether individual children or groups of children have learned some particular knowledge or skill that is important to the school and measured by the test. The test you take to get a driving license is a criterion-referenced test of basic competency.

The norm-referenced tests have been in general use for much longer and provide most of the achievement test information which is available to the public today and on which public dissatisfaction with the schools is based. The basic competency tests now being designed and used for the first time in some states are criterion referenced tests that attempt to measure certain competencies the state has decided a student should have to get a high school diploma or to reach some other educational milestone. But norm-referenced tests are used also for such purposes. Testers have never been able to achieve adequate public understanding of the meaning and appropriate use of norm-referenced tests, and it is unlikely that they will succeed in doing so for new forms of testing. This is because mental measurement is a highly technical field and also because most people engaged in it aren't very good at explaining it to laymen.

With this brief excursion into testing, I now want to comment on the uses and misuses of norm-referenced tests. The processes that go into their construction and the way their results are reported limit their usefulness in the

front lines of the classroom. Such tests tell you that Johnny in grade six reads at the seventh grade level; or that Miss Smith's fourth grade class has an average reading skill at the third grade level; or that Suzy is at the 99th percentile in mathematics achievement among tenth graders; or that the average sixth grade reading level in Super Suburb is one grade above the norm; or that Hope City has had steadily declining reading scores for four years.

Such information doesn't tell you that Johnny is goofing off in school and much more might be expected of him; that Miss Smith's class is composed mostly of the kids of migrant workers and doing just fine; that Suzy is heading for a nervous breakdown through pressures from her parents to get into Radcliffe; that Super Suburb with a high average family income and 95 percent of its parents college graduates is experiencing a property tax revolt and starving its schools, whose sixth graders should really test at a year and a half or two years above the norm; or that Hope City lost its two largest employers six years ago, an insurance company and an IBM plant, and has suffered an outmigration of skilled workers since then.

While norm-referenced tests have some potential for providing information that can be used by teachers, it is not in convenient form. Mainly such tests take the temperature of the patient but give few hints about the disease or its diagnosis. You have to know a great deal more than the test score to draw any meaning from the comparison it provides. And even if you know enough to do so, you still haven't got information that will be useful to assist Johnny or Miss Smith.

In a speech nicely sub-titled "How Mean is the Median," Henry Dyer calls for "eliminating the idea that a test score in itself tells anything whatever about the behavior it summarizes." *

Indeed the kind of information we have from norm-referenced tests couldn't be better designed for misunderstanding and misuse through public pressures on public policy bodies. Luckily most persons in a position to influence educational policy have moved beyond the simplistic and mistaken notion that all eighth graders should score at or above the eighth grade level on standardized achievement tests, but I still hear this sort of foolishness occasionally from surprising sources. It is the equivalent of saying that all football teams should win at least half their games.

Despite these difficulties norm-referenced tests remain the most widely used types of tests in the schools. Not only are they limited for helping to define solutions to the problems they identify; they are not much use either for evaluating educational programs because they provide little or no guidance on which aspects of a program are working and which are not. To quote Ralph Tyler, "scores on such tests do not show the extent to which students have learned what the schools seek to teach, although many laymen interpret them this way." **

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* Criticisms of Testing: How Mean is the Median by Henry S. Dyer. Address to the National Council on Measure in Education, April 6, 1977.

** Policy Issues in Education, edited by Allen C. Ornstein & Steven I. Miller, Lexington Books of D. C. Heath, 1976 pp. 19-28.

you how he is doing in acquiring knowledge or skill that has been agreed upon as important and that the test is designed to measure. Examples might be the ability to multiply fractions or to write a complete sentence. The National Assessment of Education offers this type of test. Like other types it has problems and shortcomings. Among these is the difficulty of achieving agreement upon what students should be required to know or to do, particularly between educators and laymen. The New York State Board of Regents has been in a recent hassle on this subject and rejected its staff's recommendation for a basic competency test on grounds it was too easy.* One Regent tried the test on his son, who said it was "so easy it was dumb." Let's assume for the sake of argument that the Regent's son is somewhat above average in skills and learning for a high school student. A test that would really challenge him would eliminate from graduation about half the students now getting diplomas. I wonder if that's what the Regents want?

In spite of such problems, we should continue the effort to build good criterion-referenced tests. If we are to do a better job teaching basic skills to children, we need to improve the capacities of teachers to tune their teaching methods and materials to the needs of the individual child. To do this, we need very different instruments from the usual standardized achievement test, and we need instruments that are carefully made, not hastily concocted from existing

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*New York Times, February 13, 1978 and Editorial on February 20, 1978

tests. So I would strongly recommend more attention to the development of tests to give teachers information with which they can define the learning needs of children and plan instruction accordingly.

There are two corollaries of this recommendation. First, new energies must be mustered by NIE for the development and improvement of testing that really helps teachers in the diagnosis of learning problems. Second, there must be opportunities for teachers to learn more about using tests effectively, particularly as new tests are developed. Congress can act on this front by encouraging the in-service training of teachers. It could re-enact the Education Professions Development Act that was unfortunately allowed to lapse in the mid 1970s. If we had it now, it would be an important tool for teacher training in the use of tests to improve basic skills. If any interest develops in reviving this legislation, it should be specially focussed upon in-service training and should include the training of principals and other administrators as well as school board members.

No amount of giving tests to children will ever teach children to read and write better. The right kinds of tests can help to identify problems and to provide a basis for planning remedial efforts. Also, I suspect that tests which ask kids to produce a correct answer rather than recognize one among a list of wrong answers might be an advantage. But if a change is to take place between a particular teacher and a particular child some change will have to occur in the teacher's repertoire of skills. Federal support to help teachers upgrade their skills and to encourage states and localities to do likewise makes good sense.

I have some concerns about the minimum competency bandwagon that is riding down the main street of American education today. Suppose we are successful in improving our national achievement test scores by warning kids, "You can't enter the ninth grade until you can read at the sixth grade level," or "You can't graduate from high school without eighth grade reading skills." No doubt such pressures will result in improved skills among some youngsters, but what do we do with the children who just don't make it, either because of the shortcomings of their schools or their own problems? Is American society ready to live with a growing number of young persons who are rejected by the schools between age fourteen and seventeen without credentials that will allow them a chance at a job and a decent life? The recent youth employment legislation seems to say no. That law, administered in the Labor Department, launches a major program linking work and education and encouraging young people to stay in school.

There is no question in my mind, however, about the effects of minimum competency testing, as presently conceived, a few years hence. It must have one of three effects--maybe all three at the same time. The schools must become more willing than they now are to hold youngsters in grade and work flexibly and imaginatively to solve their learning problems, allowing them to progress through school at differing rates and with increased costs of school completion for a significant number of students. Or we must develop some alternative form of institution unlike the present schools and more like the Job Corps for those the schools are unable to serve. Or we must all live with the consequences

of a group of young people rejected by our educational system and our economic system and embittered by their rejection in the name of improving educational standards.

The first of these scenarios is obviously the most attractive. It may also be the most difficult to follow because it requires both more money and significant changes in the schools. The second may be worth pursuing, but it too requires added funds and real inventiveness in relating school curricula to jobs. The third is unthinkable, but we could stumble into it through mistaken assumptions about both educational standards and the proper role of the schools and through our inability to muster the funds needed for the first two options.

This meeting should also consider whether tests are in some way unfair to minorities who score lower than the general population. From what I know about the complicated topic of cultural bias, I would say that responsible test developers are acutely aware of the issue and try out test items on varied populations to protect against bias. I have seen convincing evidence, for example, that the Scholastic Aptitude Test of the College Entrance Examination Board is not culturally biased when used for the purpose for which it is intended--helping to predict academic performance in undergraduate studies.

Not only should this matter be continually re-examined, but also test developers should make public their efforts to guard against cultural bias and should subject their testing instruments to independent studies. The National Assessment's use of external public screening committees offers a model for others to consider. Only if such precautions are taken, can we be assured that

the measurements used in schools are fair to all. The past history of mental measurement is not blameless in this regard.

While on the subject of fairness to minorities, I have to raise the difficult question of whether the national mood for improving basic skills performance has hidden within it overtones of racism. There is no simple answer. As Kenneth Clark and others have so cogently argued, we do black children a disservice not to hold them to the same expectations we do white children. At the same time we know that inequalities in the lives of children outside the school are reflected in school performance and that black, hispanic, and Native American children are peculiarly subject to handicaps from both poverty and discrimination. The concept of special additional efforts on their behalf is now a public policy of the United States Government and of the governments of many states. Basic competency testing will certainly result in more educational delays and denials for minorities than for the rest of us. The only resolution of this difficulty I can accept, is a clear commitment by those who advocate basic competency testing to provide at the same time all the special additional services that may be needed to help less fortunate children meet the test requirements.

Before we enshrine the use of testing in legislative and administrative actions we must ask whether we really know enough about the measurement of cognitive ability. When legislators and high-level policy persons start making firm and detailed decisions in highly technical areas they can end up making mistakes. In no sense am I questioning the motives of those who would stipulate testing activities in national or state legislation. Clearly they want to help children by

improving schools. Yet somehow, as I watch state legislatures legalizing Laetrile as a cancer cure, I can't help worrying about their blessings for certain forms of mental testing.

From what little I know about testing, I am inclined to think that the basic competency movement is rushing schools into wider use of tests, some of which are simply inappropriate for the broad purpose of improving basic competency. It takes several years to make a good test, try it out, and find what validity it has. That kind of effort is not reflected in competency tests that are hastily concocted in response to political directives.

The problems of legislating in complex and rapidly changing fields, such as mental measurement or cancer cures, may require quasi-governmental or private agencies to help us seek wisdom on such matters. The testing field has been the subject of a four-cornered shouting match among testers, teachers, policy makers, and parents in recent years. Some way to reduce the noise and improve the communication might be useful. For example, the National Academy of Education has in its membership many of the scholars whose fundamental work lies behind the tests we now use and those we will design and use in the future. It could be given a much stronger role in advising on the kinds of questions we are considering here. And it might even make sense for the Congress to consider chartering that body, as it once did the National Academy of Sciences, in order to give the Academy of Education a wider reach in educational affairs. In addition, there is a need in the field of testing for continued basic

research on the assumptions that underlie it and the disciplines that contribute to it. This is proper business for NIE and probably for the National Institutes of Health as well.

But seeking dispassionate advice from wise men together with calling for new tests accompanied by teacher training in their use and basic research on testing will not quiet the discontents among us about childrens' reading, writing, and computation. Nor should they do so. Evidence from existing tests tells us that we have to do a better job with fundamental skills in the schools. Recent research argues that almost all children who have the mental capacity to master spoken language also have the potential to master reading and computational skills. Successful projects developed with support of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act suggest that the ingenuity of teachers and principals is equal to the task in some schools, particularly when there is careful planning and continuity of effort. The National Institute of Education found in a recent study of that program that it was reaching its objective of serving disadvantaged children more effectively than in earlier years, and this finding has been matched by a significant increase in the President's budget for fiscal year 1979. * There is hope for improvement in children's learning in these developments. My personal view is that state and national efforts under Title I and similar programs will be more important in making progress than will the contribution of tests. But the two can work together to advantage.

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* The Effects of Services on Student Development: A Report from the National Institute of Education Comparative Education Study, September 30, 1977.

There are, of course, numerous barriers to progress in basic learning ranging from disorder in some schools to inequitable distribution of the funds for education. The special dilemma of making schools work in urban ghettos cries out for resolution. But these are the subjects of other conferences.

We will not make progress by sloganeering, whether we shout "back to basics" or "forward to fundamentals." We will not make progress by creating scapegoats. People who work in schools are no different from people who work as lawyers or politicians or government officials--a few are indifferent and self-serving; a few are inept; most are trying honestly to do a good job, sometimes against great odds; some are extremely skillful and successful.

The controversy brought on by the back-to-basics movement and the accompanying rapid move to basic competency testing and to wider use of testing for assessment of schools has unfortunately polarized educators and the friends of education. But there is really no essential conflict between improving teaching and learning in fundamental skills and the interest of educators both in developing good citizenship and sound values and in offering to young people opportunities in such areas as art and music. There may be some extremists in the back-to-basics camp who want to use it for the ulterior purpose of cutting education costs by ridding the schools of important acitivites, which they regard as frills. But this is not characteristic of most of the people harboring a concern for improving learning skills. So I return to where I started--we are fortunate in the schools we have and fortunate also that we are dissatisfied with them. I hope that your deliberations will guide that dissatisfaction into constructive channels.